

Ten Years Later

by Novus

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Ten Years Later by Paul Leone (NovusSibyl@aol.com)

Rating: PG-13 - some violence, adult language Summary: Ten years later. Type: Action Author's Note: Thanks to Teresa and Ra for helping me brainstorm and edit this. Also, I crave feedback. That's NovusSibyl@aol.com. Thank you. Push the button, Frank. Disclaimer: Buffy, Faith, Giles, Willow, Cordelia, Spike, Oz and Xander are the creation and property of Joss Whedon and Mutant Enemy. Mira Roukas is mine, however.

Part I - Dinner at the Mayor's -----

The usual shakes start right after I turn off Route 17 and onto Miller Road. I keep telling myself that next time I'll take the main road through town, but every time I find myself driving right past Wayfare Lane.

As soon as I see the two-story house half-hidden by trees, the sobs start and I start remembering.

Stop it. I will NOT go through this again. Not tonight.

I guess all those therapy sessions weren't a complete loss. By the time I pull into the Mayor's driveway, I'm mostly composed. I take a minute to clean myself off and put on my game f - happy face.

Typically, I'm the last one to arrive. The Mayor's BMW is out front and that ratty old Ford that Pastor Bandera drives is on the grass. I can't help but smile at the little slice of chaos in an otherwise stiflingly impeccable front lawn. It's so typical.

And then I'm at the front door and that annoying little motion-sensor

doorbell goes off inside about a half second before one of the butlers - Juan, I think - opens the door for me.

"Ah, come in, Professora. They are in the dining room," he says with a smile, holding out his hands for my coat.

I shake my head. "I'll keep it, thank you."

Juan - or whoever - nods and vanishes into the woodwork. Literally, I realize with a shudder. He's a phaser. I wonder if she - of course she knows. She's the Mayor.

And speak of the Devil. There she is, in all her trademark Saks Fifth Avenue glory. Drunk, too, ahead of schedule, judging by the embarrassed look on the Pastor's face.

"Hey, Willow darling," she slurs, confirming my guess, and clumsily hugs me. "You look - well, very Willowy. Very academic."

"Hello, Cordelia," I say, gently pulling myself out of her hug. God! She must have started early. Her breath reeks of alcohol. "You look good." Except for the bags under her eyes. I almost laugh. I could tell her about sleepless nights that would make her pretty hair turn white.

She smiles and staggers back, somehow managing not to spill the glass of wine in her hand. You have to admire the talent.

"It's good to see you, Willow," the Pastor says, squeezing past Cordelia and giving me a quick hug. Even after all this time, it's still awkward. But I return the hug, forcing myself not to think about bad memories.

"Hi." It's all I can manage.

The Pastor smiles sadly. She understands. I hate her.

As always, we start out with small talk. "So, how was the drive up here?" Cordelia asks in one of her more sober moments. "Did you see the new stadium?"

Wonderful. Such tact. The Pastor almost spits out her club soda - no alcohol for her, smart girl - and I just manage a nod.

"Yes, I did. Richard Wilkins Memorial Stadium." I hiss out the name. Old habit.

Cordelia nods brightly. "It's all politics, Will."

Will. "Could you - please don't call me that, Cordelia."

"Sorry, Will-ow," she says, stretching out the 'ow' with drunken finesse.

Mercifully, the Pastor changes the subject. "How's school, Willow?"

I smile for real. "It's great. I've got some wonderful students this semester. And it looks like the Dean will grant me tenure next fall."

"That's excellent news. You're doing wonderful work, Willow, really." She smiles at me and I wish she'd just shut up, and I hate myself for it. She's a priest, for God's sake. But why does she have to be so nice to me? It would be so much easier to hate her if she was even a little bit rude.

After that, things settle down a little. Dinner - Veal Parmesan - is served and we eat mostly in quiet. Naturally, the food is superb. Fringe benefits of being friends with the mayor - one night out of the month you can eat something that doesn't come out of a box. Cordelia sobers up a little, thankfully.

Naturally, it's when things are finally approaching normalcy that the Pastor drops the bombshell.

"I'm having dreams again."

Cordelia, as usual, reacts first. "Oh, that's so lovely, dear. I had this wonderful dream about Brad Pitt - "

"I mean *dreams*," the Pastor whispers, a pained look on her face.

That's when I catch on. "Prophecy dreams?" I ask, hoping against hope that I'm wrong.

Of course I'm not. She nods and stares down at her empty glass before speaking again. "They started last week. I didn't think anything about it, really. It's been so long since I had one, I half-forgot what they were like. But then I had the same dream again the next night, and the night after that." From the look on her face, they weren't happy dreams. I can't help but feel a little gleeful and guilty at the same time.

"Hey, wait. How can you have the dreams? You're not - you know. A stabby person any more," Cordelia blurts out. I guess she wasn't as sober as she looks. Still, it's a good question.

"Who can say? There must be a reason behind it...but I don't know what it might be."

"Tell me about them. What did you see?"

"Images. Crazy images all strung together. A house...vampires. I think. A lightning bolt. And a rainbow. More, but I can't remember them or put words to them."

She's right, it's crazy. I can't think of any supernatural phenomena relating to lightning bolts and rainbows. "Anything else?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing. I'm sorry. I never was very good at that side of the lifestyle." She almost said 'as good as' and then caught herself, I think. Nobody here wants to bring that up.

"I'll dig into the books. There might be something useful."

"Thank you. I know that this is important somehow. A call..." her voice trails off and finally she just shrugs. "The way will show itself, I'm sure."

Proving she's not asleep, Cordelia chirps up. "Maybe it's got something to do with the new Slayer in town."

"New Slayer? Coulda mentioned that earlier, Cordelia," the Pastor snaps. Funny how she regresses whenever she gets angry.

Cordelia smiles slyly. "Mayoral privilege, sweetie. S'my job to keep things under control."

"You sound just like Snyder, Cordelia." Snyder and that bastard Wilkins.

"She's drunk, Willow, don't be too harsh."

"Don't you start! She's got no right keeping things like that from us of all people."

She squeezes my shoulder, just hard enough to push me down into my chair. Some things you never forget, I guess. "Willow, please. Arguing won't get us anywhere." Then, to Cordelia. "What new Slayer?"

Cordelia shrugs. Dammit, why can't she sober up? If the Pastor wasn't around, I'd magick the booze out of her. But things are tense enough without an argument, or worse, about witchcraft.

"What am I, a phone book? Some girl. The cops have seen her around town the last few days, killing vampires." She clumsily pantomimes stabbing. "Dark hair. Pretty. The usual."

"We'll have to find her. She must be part of it. It can't be a coincidence that my dreams started just when the Slayer arrives in town."

For once, I agree with the Pastor. Damn it, Cordelia, you should have told us earlier. Should have told us as soon as you found out. "I'll ask around. I bet Willie knows something."

"Willie? Oh, please. I ran that sleazeball out of town," Cordelia sneers.

"Ran him out of town?"

"You bet. Do you have any idea the kind of clients that cesspool he ran attracted? He's lucky I just revoked his liquor license." Her eyes light up with genuine disgust. "We don't want that kind of people in the new Sunnydale."

"You're drunk," I finally manage to say. The Pastor just sighs and shakes her head. It must be hell for her. Cordelia sounds just like that snake.

"You know that Willie has helped us in the past," the Pastor adds, trying to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

Cordelia sneers at both of us. "I don't care about your little after-hours crusade. I have to keep this town neat and tidy."

"There are some things more important than looking good for the Triple A Guide, Cordelia."

"Oh, please. Grow up. This isn't high school any more. This is the real world. I don't have time to run around playing Slayerette," Cordelia hisses. "Some of us have non-fantasy jobs."

"I don't think there's any point in continuing this conversation," the Pastor says after a ten-count. "I wish you luck in November, Cordelia."

I should stay and try to talk some sense into Cordelia, but I know it wouldn't do any good, so I just mutter a goodbye and follow the Pastor out into the front lawn.

She's already inside her car by the time I get there.

"Hey! Wait!" Very suave.

"I thought you'd try to wring some details out of Her Honor," the Pastor says after rolling down the window.

"Why bother? She's changed."

The Pastor grins and doesn't remind me what a moron I am. "Yeah, I've heard that can happen to people. Look, it's late. You should go home. Hit the books or something. I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe I'll have another dream tonight." Her grin fades as she considers it. Obviously the dreams weren't very pleasant.

"I could hack into the police network, see if they have any files on this new Slayer."

"Yeah...be careful, okay? I have a bad feeling about this."

"Don't worry. I'm still Net Girl." I feel like it's high school again.

"Just like old times, huh?" she asks, echoing my thoughts.

"Yeah. Just like...I'll be in touch if I find anything out."

"G'night, Willow."

"Good night, Faith."

I'm actually in good shape on the drive home until I see a teenage girl pounding the crap out of a pack of vampires in an alley behind what used to be The Costume Shop.

To my credit, I'm switch into autopilot mode instead of breaking down again. I'm out of the car, wooden stake in hand, before I even realize what I'm doing.

Not that my hesitation makes a difference. There were eight vampires when I slammed on the brakes and only three left when I finally start moving again.

The nearest one never sees me coming. I trip it with a garbage can

and stake it. I can just feel my adrenaline pumping like it hasn't in ten years.

As for the last two vampires, I can't help myself. I stop and watch.

At first, it looks like the usual John Woo duel, but then the Slayer jumps back and pulls out a gun, some kind of big bore machine pistol. The vampires don't have a chance - whatever kind of bullets those are, they do the job. Both vampires are dust in as long as it takes her to pull the trigger.

Look at me. I'm feeling sorry for vampires now. But still - Buffy never ever needed a gun. Except against the Judge, but that doesn't count. Whatever happened to a good old-fashioned staking?

Aside from that, it's a decent technique, but where are the puns? Kids these days.

And there we are, staring at each other. Mexican standoffs give me the creeps, so I break the silence.

"So...I take it you're the Slayer I keep hearing about?" Not my best line, but I have gotten better since the old days. At least that's what I tell myself.

She nods and stows the gun in her coat. Leather. What is it with Slayers and leather? "You should go home. It's not safe after dark." Funny accent - Greek, mostly, but there's something else there I can't place. Macedonian, maybe, or Albanian, or something.

What the hell should I say to her? Hi, I used to be best friends with a Slayer, but she died saving the world and now I teach Computer Science?

Fortunately, maybe, the girl takes advantage of my hesitation to do a backflip right over the chain link fence behind her. I'm still gaping like an idiot when she hightails it around the corner.

Well, that was brilliant. I can't help laughing. She must have thought I was completely out of my mind.

Great. This is all too much for me. I'm going home, where it's safe and comfortable.

Part II - Random Encounters -----

The next day goes relatively normally. I take a couple stabs at the police network, but can't find anything. They either don't know anything or have seriously upgraded their security. I do a little checking on the things the Pastor mentioned from her dream, but no luck there, either.

Naturally, she calls me up and asks me to come over the second I give up hope of finding anything useful.

"Hey, Willow. What's up?"

"Um...hi, Faith. Nothing. Just, you know, doing the hacker thing."

"Any luck?"

"No. I did have a run-in with the new Slayer last night, though."

A five-second silence, then "Oh. What happened?"

"Nothing. She killed some vampires. I stood around like a fifth wheel. Then she ran off."

The Pastor laughs softly. "Jittery, isn't she?"

"I guess."

Awkward pause takes over.

"So did you have another dream last night?"

"No. I'm not sure if I should be thankful or worried. Worried, probably. But there's something that's been bothering me. The rainbow..."

"What about the rainbow?"

"That's the problem. I don't know. But it's worrying me. I think it might be important."

"Maybe. But I haven't found anything in any of the books."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

I glare at the phone. She's still an annoying bitch sometimes. Especially on those too-frequent occasions when she has a point.

"Okay, you're right. I could do some more poking around, see if any of Giles' old index volumes have anything."

You can hear the wheels turning in her mind as soon as I say Giles' name.

And sure enough... "You know, Willow, Giles took a lot of his books with him...there could be something there."

"This is true. But I haven't talked to Giles in almost five years, Faith. I don't even know where he lives."

"He still has the winery in Sonoma County."

It's just so ironic that Faith, of all people, knows that for sure and I don't. "Fine. Just say it, Faith."

"Say what?"

"Say that you want me to go crawling to Giles for help."

"Now wait a second, Willow, that's not what I was going to say." Five seconds. "Okay, I was thinking maybe it would be better if you want than if I did, but I'm not going to beg you to do it."

"Okay, I'll do it."

It's good to know that I can still make Faith speechless. It's petty, but that's about all I have these days.

"Well, uh, good...Let me know how it turns out."

"Yeah. I guess I should leave now if I'm going to be back tonight."

"Okay. Drive carefully."

"Yes, mommy. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Uh-huh. Bye, Willow."

I hang up without saying goodbye. Sorry. I'm in a hurry. Really.

I'm already on the Interstate when it occurs to me that I probably should have called ahead. How do I even know Giles is in the country, let alone at home? Of course, actually having his phone number would be helpful. On the good side, the day can't get much stupider, right?

Right.

It starts out well. I make good time on the Interstate and it's still light out when I reach the little two-lane road that goes into wine country.

I love Sonoma. Maybe I'm jaded, maybe it's just Sunnydale, but you just don't see bicyclists who wave at you instead of giving you the finger much anywhere else. It's even warm enough to roll down my window - the one that works - and feel the breeze as it ruffles the grass and the leaves on the trees.

It's so Giles-y, like God made the town just for him. And the sign on his little winery - West York Winery - looks like it's been there for years. Maybe it has. I never asked Giles about it before we stopped talking, really.

So now what? I haven't seen Giles in almost five years. I'm getting the shakes just standing at his door. Should have stayed in therapy longer.

The door swings open, sparing me further misery.

God. He looks exactly the same.

"Willow! What - why - who - "

Sounds the same, too.

"Hiya, Giles. Mind if I come in?"

"Oh! Of course. Wait. No. Why are you asking?"

"Huh?" What the hell is he talking - oh, for the love of God. "Giles, it's still sunny out." Fine. I hop over the threshold. "Happy? Still

alive and soulful, see?"

"Yes, well, good." He starts to hug me, then just shakes my hand.
"What brings you to Sonoma, if I may ask?"

"I was hoping you could tell me, actually."

"Oh? How so?"

"There's this - dreams - and Faith. A rainbow."

Giles' eyebrows ratchet up another notch. "I see."

"I mean, Faith thinks she had a prophetic dream. Something about lightning. And a rainbow. And the new Slayer. Maybe. I couldn't find anything in the books you gave me and I was hoping that you had something here because I think it's going to be really important."

"Same red hair. Same voice. If she didn't look so serious, I'd think that was my Wills talking."

Oh, my *God*. I didn't even see the shadow lurking behind Giles in the dark foyer. But a tall young man steps out of the dim light and -

"XANDER!"

I nearly knock Giles over in my haste. No wonder he was surprised. Two of the old gang showing up on his doorstep at once....

Xander and I must have been hugging each other a little longer than decorum decreed, to judge by Giles' polite cough in the background. I haven't seen the man in nearly ten years, not since Buffy....well, not since a few days after that. I've gotten postcards over the years. One from Toronto, a few from Western Europe, and one from South Africa, of all the improbable places for Xander to end up.

He's changed.

I realize it when I step back and almost run into Giles again. It seems like he's gotten taller, or maybe he just stands straighter. He's got a black leather jacket on and a scar across his cheek; his hair's been cropped short, it's already got a streak of grey in it, and his eyes are....darker somehow.

"I knew it had to be Willow," he says with a sad smile. Giles puts his hands on my shoulders - I knew I was shaking, but I didn't realize how much.

"He's been here for a few days," Giles says softly.

"Came in on the midnight train from Georgia," Xander nods. He's so grown-up. Xander wasn't supposed to grow up. He's supposed to be a slouchy, tousle-haired goofball. "Had to look up Giles while I was en route. He convinced me to stay." That same lopsided smile, as if he doesn't remember how to really do it anymore. "Well, the wine convinced me."

"Thank you," Giles says wryly, then lets go of my shoulders. "Come, you must be tired - are you still living in Sunnydale?"

Of course I am. "Yeah."

"You drove up in a single day?"

"It's really, **really** important."

Xander starts in to agree with me, but Giles puts up a hand. "I know you wouldn't have come if it wasn't - oh good **Lord**, I didn't mean it that way - I just meant - I hadn't heard from you - " He shoots a pleading look at Xander.

"He doesn't get out much," Xander says with a dark grin. "Come on. We were gonna head out to look at the vineyards when you arrived. Let's hit the library, we'll talk it over there."

I still shiver when he puts his hand on the small of my back to guide me up the stairs.

It's a lot like the high school library, really; a little smaller, but I just know that it's probably most of the second floor - knowing Giles, he has a closet bedroom so that he can fit more library space in. The last of the daylight filters in through huge floor-to-ceiling windows on one side, and Xander drops into a chair that's just in shadow.

"What about you?" I ask, as Giles excuses himself for a second. "Ten years, Xander. **Ten years**. You could have sent me an address."

Xander shrugs. "I guess I never really had one."

"What did you **do**?"

"A little bit of everything." He glances down at the tabletop. "A little bit of nothing. I ah...I meant to write. More often. I...hell."

"What?"

"I used to buy things to send to you - I just never ended up sending them. Except the postcards. There's still an authentic Kenyan dance mask sitting in an apartment in Johannesburg somewhere, waiting to be mailed."

"So you had an apartment anyhow."

"Not mine. A friend's."

"Since when do you have friends in South Africa?"

"Since a lot of things happened, okay?" he snaps. "I've got a lot of friends in strange places now."

"Such as Sonoma," Giles puts in, returning with a bottle of wine and three glasses. "You're only allowed one glass, Xander."

"Killjoy."

"You're not fighting tonight, you only need one." Giles is firm. About what, I'm not sure, but I don't even know if I want to ask anymore. I don't want to get a bad answer. "Willow, would you like some?"

"Not much...thanks." I accept the quarter-full wineglass and stare at the dark liquid, trying to come up with the words to explain the last few days.

"This was the first pressing. Not a bad concoction." Giles grins wearily. Has everyone forgotten how to smile? "Now. Your reasons - Faith's dreams."

"Hang on a second. Faith as in psycho Faith? Coma Faith?"

"Oh. Well, she's better now. She's a priest."

"Okay, I know I'm sober, so I must be losing my hearing. You didn't just say Faith was a priest...did you?"

"Faith has changed quite a bit since her, um, coma."

"Faith, a priest?" Xander just gnaws on his lip. "Buffy must have hit her really hard."

"She says she saw God."

"Really really hard."

Giles coughs. "Be that as it may, I doubt she'd make up something like this."

"So what is the 'this', anyway? Lighting and rainbows? Not the usual demonic preview."

"Well, it could be any number of things. Lightning is a common element in supernatural events, of course. Rainbows, though...That sounds familiar somehow." He walks over to one of the bookshelves at the far end of the room and pulls down a dusty leather-bound book that must weigh fifteen pounds. "Let's see what this has to say."

"Oo! The Seleucian Sibyl. I didn't know there were any copies outside of the Watcher archives in London."

"Yes, well..." Giles fidgets and flips through the pages. "I somehow forgot to return it when I left the Watchers."

"You bad boy, Giles. I bet there's a huge overdue fine."

"Ah! Here we are. I was right." He pokes one of the entries towards the back of the book. "Fragment number 415. What do you think?"

I stare down at the text and squint a bit, then shrug. "Um, it's all Greek."

"Oh. Oh! Yes, of course." Giles picks the book up and recites the text. "When Athena's heir takes up her sword, there shall - There's a bit missing, unfortunately. But it carries on. The children of Hades

shall cry out as one and Zeus will rain his arrows upon them in his wrath, but the sleeper shall arise upon the blood of the slain unless the champion of the rainbow and the keys - and that's where it stops."

"Well, that's cheery. And so helpfully ending right at the important part."

"That's true, but it does at least tell us that Faith's dreams do have some significance. Now we merely need to discover whom the sleeper in question is, and who the champion is, and...I'll see if there's anything in the Lancer Commentaries." He gives a strained smile and retreats to the shelves.

"Still loves his books, doesn't he?"

"You can take the Watcher out of Giles, but you can't - no, wait. You know what I mean."

"The scary thing is, I do." He takes a long sip of wine, then smiles. "God, I can't believe how you're all grown up now, Wills."

If you hadn't run off, you'd have been there with me, Xander. I just smile and nod. "You look - older. What have you been doing all this time? I demand details!"

Xander's smile just shrivels up and dies. He stares at his wineglass for a few seconds, then shrugs. "Well, for a while after...all the stuff, I was a wreck. I ended up living with my Uncle Rory for a while. Then I just left. Got on a bus heading east and ended up in Baltimore." He steals Giles' wineglass and finishes it off. "This stuff is great. Where was I?"

"Baltimore."

"Oh, right. Baltimore. This was probably four months after I left Sunnydale. I...well, really long story goes there. But basically I ended up almost becoming a midnight snack for a vampire..."

"And?"

"And I kicked his pasty little ass. That's when I realized that I was actually good for something."

"Killing vampires?"

"Bingo. Five years with...five years in Sunnydale knowing what was *really* going on, it teaches you a few things."

"Tell me about it." That wine keeps looking more tempting. Xander pours us both another when he finishes his.

"I cleaned up Baltimore pretty quickly. Second-rate, the lot of them. After that I went to Canada - you wouldn't believe the bastard demons they've got up there. I always thought Canada was quiet and boring. That Due South show betrayed me, I tell you."

"Okay...So you what, you're like a guy Slayer?"

Xander shook his head. "Not really. I'm not super-strong or, well,

super-smart, but I do what I can. I spent a couple years in England..."

"England?" I don't like where this is going.

"Yeah. I, um...I got some professional training there, kind of got me a mentor."

"A mentor? Who?" I ask as my stomach sinks down into my toes.

He jerks his head towards the bookshelves. Fuck. I hate it when I'm right like this. "We ran into each other in some little hick village in north England about eight years ago. Who knew one of his old college buddies lived next to a Hellmouth? He taught me a few tricks, some weapons stuff, and then I headed across the Channel to France. I asked him not to tell anyone."

"You bastard." Must be the wine that's stopping me from breaking his neck.

"I know, Wills. I'm sorry."

"You *bastard*."

"Willow..."

"Sorry." I hate this. I hate Faith for making me come out here. I hate Xander for being here, for ten years without even a fucking phone call. I hate Giles for not telling me. "Go on."

"Not much more to tell. Wandered around Europe for about five years, busted up a few vampire nests, killed this really slimy...worm-thing...in Estonia, then I got word of a big hellmouthy deal in Johannesburg. Turns out it was nothing, but I got sidetracked with some jungle demons and stayed in Africa for a while. Came back to the States - I really did just come from Georgia. I was on my way to....hell. Sunnydale. I didn't think I was, I thought I'd hit San Francisco, but ten *years*, Wills. I got...homesick."

What the hell does he want me to say? Ten years without even a phone call. Why didn't you take me with you, Xander? I would have come. I would have dropped it all to go with you rather than stay here and pick up the pieces after Buffy died. I just nod and squeeze his shoulder.

All I can do is smile and hope I don't start crying. "It's good that you're back."

"It'll be just like the old days, Wills. So what about you? What have you been doing all this time?"

"Oh. Well, I finished college and got a job teaching Computer Science at the new high school. Oh and some nights, I go out to hunt vampires." God, I really am pathetic, aren't I? I don't need to go into the therapy and string of failed relationships.

"Still kicking butt! That's my Willow."

Your Willow? I'm this close to calling him on that little gem when Giles comes rushing back.

"Ah-ha! I found it!"

He slams another book down on the table, shaking up a cloud of dust thick enough to make me gag.

"According to this annotation, the original written oracle was altered by pagan copyists in the 2nd century BC - the proper names have all been changed to those of Greek gods. But the Watchers managed to get one of the originals. Athena appears to indicate some kind of semi-divine warrior. A Slayer, in other words. Children of Hades is obviously a reference to vampires."

"What about the rest of it?"

"According to Professor Lancer, it seems to be a prophecy of a ritual of resurrection."

"Vampire resurrection?"

"Precisely," Giles says, a satisfied look on his face.

"But what vampire?"

Poof! There goes the smugness. "Well...of course, there's no way to know for sure. It must be a powerful vampire to inspire this sort of loyalty among its followers, of course."

"Great, that really narrows it down, G-Man."

"Xander...It's okay, Giles." Crap. It's almost eight. "I have to go. I've got papers to grade by tomorrow or the dean will have my head. I'll call you if anything comes up, okay?"

"Okay. Be careful, Willow."

"I will."

Giles gives me a quick handshake, then goes back to his books.

"I'll, uh - I'll show her out, Giles."

"Hm? Oh, yes, quite." Then he's back in the shelves.

Even with the streetlights, it's almost pitch black outside on the street. I can barely see Xander.

"Where are you staying?" I hear myself ask after a few awkward seconds.

"Giles has a spare room. I've got a sleeping bag. Match made in heaven, right?"

"Yeah..." That of all things does it. I'm glad it's dark - he can't see me crying. "I'll call you guys tomorrow, okay? I wish I could stay."

"I wish you could, too," he says in a strange, soft tone of voice.

"Good night, Xander." I pretty much run to my car and tear out of the parking lot, out of Sonoma, before I can get second thoughts.

Part III - Cold Dark Places -----

Considering my state of mind, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner. I must have gone eighty all the way home - all the way to here, anyhow, sitting in a stopped car on the side of the road with police lights reflecting in the rearview mirror and a tall, gangling officer bending to look in the passenger's side window.

"License and registration, ma'am - " He gasps for show and holds his hand over his heart. "Oh, saints preserve me! Could it be? Is it possible?"

Oh, fuck me. What is this, freaking reunion weekend? "Spike."

He leans on the door and pokes his head through the open window, a sick smile on his face. "You have any idea how fast you were going back there, little missy?"

I sigh and reach for the cross I've got wedged between the seat and gearshift. He shakes his head and gives the car door a good thump.

"No need, Witch." He says witch like it's an honorific. "Though I could ask why you're speeding and crying at the same time."

Goddamn his vampiric sight. "It's none of your business. Thanks."

"I could write you a ticket."

"Then fucking write it, okay?" I know I'm pushing it, but it's been a long day. "I'll send the goddamn check tomorrow. Just leave me the hell alone."

"Hey hey hey, is that any way to talk to an old sparring mate? I'm on the side of law and order now, you know. Got me a badge and everything."

"A badge? What crackerjack box gave that to you?"

"The one named Cordelia Chase."

"Cordelia? Oh, come on."

Spike smiles and shows off his uniform. He's so goddamn smug, I'm tempted to shove a cross into his eyesocket. "Honest. I'm head of the bloody Special Security Detail. Got a badge and a gun and everything, luv."

"So what the hell are you doing pulling speeders over?" Why do I even believe him? Shouldn't I be surprised and in denial?

"Tut tut, Witchling. You were going awfully fast back there, and if I remember the old Willow right, she wouldn't even go the speed limit."

"You didn't answer the question."

"Honestly, luv? I was waiting for you."

"Waiting for me."

"Honest. You've been poking your nose in books again, haven't you? Wondering about lightning and rainbows, maybe?"

I'm gripping the wheel so hard my knuckles are turning white. "What do you know about it?"

"Oh, me? Nothing. I'm just a dumb bloody cop. I think I'll let you off with a warning this time. You just be more careful in future, ma'am." He stands to go, knowing I'll ask, knowing I'll crawl...

"Spike, *please*."

"What was that?"

Goddammit, I should break one of Faith's holy water bottles over his face. "Please tell me what you know, Spike."

"Now that's better. It's quite simple, really. A pack of filthy little troublemakers are planning on raising up your old chum Hiisi."

Oh, God. God, no. Faster than I ever thought I could, I slam the stick into D and floor the gas pedal.

"Hey!" Spike topples back and yells something else, but I'm already a block away and making the turn onto Williams Circle.

Good thing Queen's Hill is only a mile away or I'd get pulled over for real. As it is, I almost run over a stop sign before I screech to a stop in front of the main gate.

It's not locked in any serious way - the owner probably gave up after it got smashed up by vampires coming up one too many times. I just push it open and slip in, cross and stake ready.

All alone in a cemetery in the middle of the night. Panic makes you stupid, I guess. I don't even have a flashlight or even a cigarette lighter. But that's okay. I've been here enough times that I don't need one. And no vampires or demons ambush me from the darkness.

Section 5, Plot 45 - right under a pair of oak trees that get bigger every time I visit. The cross is still there, a darker spot in the darkness, even if I can't read the inscription.

Then there's a soft click and a spot of light appears a few feet away. I almost kick out, but I'm tired enough to let my brain take over at the last second.

"God! Faith, that's a bad habit."

Faith shrugs as she lights the cigarette. "These are the clean kind, don't worry."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"Sorry," she says with a smile that looks weird in the flickering reddish glow of her cigarette.

"So what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"Oh." Then it hits me. "How'd you know I'd be here?"

She gets a funny look on her face and exhales a thin cloud of smoke. "Someone told me you'd be coming."

I hate it when people get cryptic. Bad enough when spirits of the outer darkness do it, but humans - priests especially - should be more polite. "Faith, I'm not in the mood for twenty questions. Spill."

"I was told that you'd be coming here and that I should go meet you." I've heard her use that tone of voice before.

Great. Faith and her Joan of Arc complex, just when I need her sane. "Why?"

"Dunno. So why are you here at this hour?"

I start to tell her about Giles - and Xander - and what Spike said, but at that point, a gang of vampires rudely interrupt and attack us.

I'd like to say that we kick ass, but the vampires got the drop on us. And in our favor, there are ten of them. I take a bit of smug pride when Faith goes down first, but then one of the vampires smacks me on the back of the head and everything gets dark.

I wake up chained to a stone wall and manage not to scream. Not that impressive, though, since nobody is sticking me with red-hot pokers or anything.

It looks like they stuck us in a big cave. There's a fire going in the middle, big enough that I can kinda see most of the cave if I turn my head - they were nice enough not to chain my neck, too. Scratch that wall - I'm stuck to a stalagmite. About ten feet away, Faith is in the same boat. Ten feet to my right is the new Slayer, finding new and creative uses for Greek.

"Can you keep it down? You're not helping my headache," I hiss in less than perfect modern Greek.

"Who are you?" she asks in that weird Oxford-Greek, then rattles the chains a bit. They hold. Dammit.

"Willow Rosenberg. I'd shake your hand, but..." Rattle rattle.

She smiles a bit. Good. She's not in shock or drugged. Maybe the vampires weren't as smart as I thought. "I'm Mira. Mira Eudoxia Roukas."

"Hi. We have to stop meeting like this."

Another smile, some more rattles until she's red in the face.

"Shh. You'll just let them know we're awake."

"Right." She looks so disappointed. Why do Slayers always want to break things? "What happened?"

Great. So much for me asking her. "Don't you know?"

"If I knew, would I have asked?"

Good point. "How long have you been here?"

She tries to shrug, but what with the chains, it just looks silly. "A few hours. Perhaps more. I only woke up before you came."

"Great."

At this point, Faith wakes up with a moan and - naturally - starts rattling the chains. "Son of a...grr." I can practically hear her counting to ten, then "Willow?" in a scary - bad scary - tone of voice.

"I'm here, Faith."

"Any idea where here is?"

I shake my head. "Probably somewhere near the ocean. I think I can hear the waves. Are you okay?"

A long silence.

"Faith?"

"I'm bleeding from the head, I think. Nothing serious. I'm not dizzy."

Great. Assets - one ex-Slayer with a head injury and one current Slayer chained up tight. And one rapidly panicking computer science teacher/ amateur witch. Debits - at least ten vampires who want to kill us in order to resurrect a five thousand year old vampire sorcerer. The odds are not good.

My gloomy musings are cut off when a door somewhere across the cave opens and two vampires in black robes - typical - come in, dragging someone between them. It's too damn dark to see who it is as they're chaining him - her - up against another stalagmite. Then the vampires glide back out without a word.

We all kind of stare at each other for a few minutes, or at least I think we do since I can't even see the new person. The fire is starting to die down.

The silence lasts until the newcomer tests the chains. "Huh. Good quality. Gotta admire professionalism like this."

Oh, God, this is getting just too weird. It can't be - no, it has to be. Who else would it be? Still, I have to be sure. "You sound like

someone who knows from shackles."

His head bobs up - I think. Something dark moved, at least. "Huh. Three Sunnydaleites. I'll swap you our present predicament for the assurance that you're who I think you are."

"OZ! Oz! It's me, Willow!" Rattle rattle rattle. "And Faith."

"Not in the same body, are you? Because I was told this was just a plain old blood sacrifice."

Same old Oz, God bless him. "No, Faith's over there. Say 'hi', Faith."

Faith mumbles something. She never really liked Oz that much.

"Hey Faith. Who's Victim Number Three?"

"Mira. Mira Eudoxia Roukas," she calls out in Oxford-Greek. "I'm the Slayer."

"Cool. I'd shake your hand, but - " Clank. "You know. Sorry."

"I forgive you."

Oh, brother, they're bonding. "So how'd they get you, Oz?"

"Ambushed me after a gig I did at the Meadowlands. They got me in the bathroom at LaGuardia and stuffed me on a charter flight. Et voila. How about you?"

"They hit me and Faith at the cemetery just now. They were lucky, we were stupid."

He doesn't ask what Faith and I were doing at the cemetery, just grunts. Fame hasn't changed Oz much, I guess.

"How about you, Mira Eudoxia Roukas?"

Good question. Wish I'd thought of it.

I can actually hear her blush, I swear to God. "I was just coming out of the shower when they ambushed me. I only killed four."

Four? Sure, Gun Girl. "With what? Your brush handle?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

"Oh." Okay, maybe the guns were more of a labor-saving device. I should just keep my big mouth shut and get us out of here. Somehow. Before the vampires come back and kill us all so Hiisi can come back to life and take over the world.

That didn't help.

"Does anybody have a plan?"

"It would help if I knew what was going on," Mira points out. Creepy - aside from the accent, she sounds almost like Buffy. Her words, not

her voice, I mean.

"It's your usual vampire resurrection via human sacrifice," Oz answers.

"The ritual requires all the people who were present when the vampire died in order to work. Which doesn't really explain you, though. You were still using training wheels when Hiisi died."

"Training wheels? What?"

"The rainbow," Faith blurts out.

"What?"

"She's the rainbow."

"Mira's a rainbow?"

"Uh-huh." She tugs at the chains a bit, then turns towards me. "From the book."

"Right. Hang in there, Faith. We'll get out of this."

"How? You have a plan?" Mira chirps in.

"Still working on that, sweetie," I hiss. The truth is, I have no idea what to do. I should have listened to Spike - not flown off like an idiot or at least swung by the house to pick up some real weapons first. Or called Giles and Xander.

Giles and Xander. Where are they? The vampires don't have them yet. I hope.

God, don't even think they got captured, you'll -

That's when I hear the gunfire.

Part IV - The Rainbow -----

Gunfire? What the fuck?

"What was that?"

"Was that a - "

"Did you hear that?"

"QUIET!"

They shut up. Heh. Still got it.

Of course, by this time, the gunshots - or whatever - have stopped.

"Shit. Mira - any luck with the chains?"

Rattle rattle rattle. "No. I'm sorry."

Great. Just freaking great. We're going to die. The vampires are

going to come back and kill us all and then Hiisi will rise and kill everyone else.

"Miss Rosenberg!"

"What?"

"Calm down, please."

Who the hell is she to tell me to - calm down, Willow. Deep breaths.

There's a clatter from above - like when they brought Oz in. This time, there are six vampires and two people, trussed up and being dragged more than walking.

The worst part is, I know who they are before I even see them.

"Hiya, Giles."

"Hallo, Willow."

"Hey, Wills."

"Hi, Xander."

"Hey Giles."

"Hello, Oz."

"Hi, Giles."

"Faith."

"Xander."

"Hi, lady."

"Hello, sir. Sirs."

"I hate to interrupt such thrilling conversation, but maybe we should try and get out of here?"

"Well, I'm open to any plans you have, Willow."

"Yeah. 'Cause our plan didn't work well really."

Xander sounds funny, too. This is - God, please don't let us die.

"It perhaps would have worked if you weren't drunk," Mira snaps.

Drunk? Oh, fuck, Xander. I should have figured it out. We really are doomed.

"Drunk is good," Xander mumbles. He's probably close to passing out. "Demons...can't read yer mind if you can't think straight."

"I'm sorry, Willow," Giles says softly, over Xander's mutterings. Yeah thanks, Giles. He's always sorry, but there's nothing sorry can do about it.

"How much has he had, Giles?"

"Willow..."

"How fucking much?"

Giles sighs. "I'm not sure. More than I thought."

"You let him do this?"

"Yes, well I didn't have a choice much, did I?"

Oz rattles his chains, urgently. "Bickering ending anytime soon? I'd like to get cracking on one of those really great escape plans we used to come up with all the time."

It's Faith's turn to be morbid. "Those were Buffy's department, remember?" she asks, not quite managing to keep the jealousy out of her voice.

"She sure had some half-assed plots in that brain of hers." Xander again, slurring even more than before.

"What, are you on some kind of alcoholic IV drip, Xand? You're getting worse by the second."

"Losing the adrenaline rush. Buffy...she was great. She coulda kicked ass. She coulda saved us." He snuffles. "Not me."

"Oh, *do* let's get nostalgic," Giles snaps.

"HEY! Everybody shut UP!"

I've never heard Oz yell before. *Never*. His voice echoes back weirdly.

"Oz is right. We'll never get out of here if we don't stop acting like teenagers. Giles, Xander, does anybody know you're here?"

"No, I'm afraid."

"Great. Dammit, why couldn't you stay away?"

"We were trying to save you. Maybe some gratit - grati - thanks, huh?"

"Xander, we were safe until you showed up. They couldn't have killed us or else their ritual wouldn't work."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Hey, wait. It won't work anyway. We're not all here," Faith says after a second. "I mean, I wasn't even out of my coma when this Hiisi got killed and - well, Buffy was still alive."

"I wish," Oz says, a pensive frown on his face. "The vampires gloated about it on the flight out here. That's what the new Slayer is for. They're gonna use her life energy to substitute for Buffy." He glances at Mira. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "The vampires actually told you their plans?" she asks, trying not to laugh. I guess it's a good thing someone finds the hidden humor here.

"Yup. They tend to do that, you know."

"How bizarre."

I try to tell them to shut up and come up with a plan, but even as I open my mouth, the vampires, all ten of them, come back. The tallest one, who looks barely human, even for a vampire, is carrying a long red knife and a brass jar covered with some kind of runes. Hiisi's ashes must be in there, God only knows how they got them.

Time's up. We lose.

"Who wants to die first?" the lead vampire, the one with the knife, asks. How polite.

I can't help but giggle. Neither can Faith or Mira or Xander. That just pisses them off, but since they're about to kill us, who the fuck cares?

"You. Slayer."

"Which one? There's two of us."

"Three, if you count the time Buffy and I switched bodies," I point out.

"Silence. Take her," he says, pointing at Mira with that knife. "Her blood will tear the veil between worlds and call out to our Master."

"Dear Lord, don't let those be the last words I ever hear," Mira mutters as a group of vampires unchain her.

"Your tongue will go first..." the vampire leader snarls, running his finger along the blade of the knife. As he does, there's a rumble - it sounds funny, like it's coming from far away, but the ground shakes slightly.

"What the - ?"

"Merely a storm! Your puny god seeks to frighten us with his tricks."

"Wait a moment and you'll see what my God can do," Mira says in a whisper so soft I can barely hear her.

"What?" the vampire asks, leaning close. "A last request?"

"Yes. Die." She tears her arms free, then shoves the palm of her right hand into his face. Then the vampire's head explodes.

What happens next is - well, I can barely describe it. Mira dances around the vampires - not literally, but she moves so gracefully it's almost like dancing. Somehow she gets a hold of a torch and starts burning the vampires. At least that's what I think at first, then I realize it's not a torch that's burning - it's her hands...

"The rainbow..." Faith murmurs, catching on about half a second after I do.

Mira's hands are shooting flame like a fan - green and blue and yellow and red and white jets are arcing out and catch the vampires like dry kindling.

They're screaming. I've never heard a vampire scream before. But I don't feel sorry for them. All I do is think of Buffy and I start grinning like an idiot as their dead flesh burns and melts every time Mira so much as pokes one of them.

And then, just like that, it's over. The last vampire goes up like a firecracker - pop pop pop - and then dusts out. Mira pants a few times and stares at her hands. The fires shorten and then die down.

"Bitching."

My head is racing, I can't even be sure who said that. Maybe it was me.

Someone rattles their chains. "Little help here?"

Xander. Figures.

"So...that's it? I was thinking something more climatic," Oz says while Mira works at breaking my chains. Sweet that she thought of me first. Or maybe I was just the whiniest.

At that point, the door that we were all pulled through explodes. Considering the door was solid iron as thick as my wrist, that's pretty impressive.

"That works," Oz says when the boom boom boom echo stops.

A man in combat armor - flak jacket, helmet with plexiglass shields, all that crap - steps through what used to be the door. He's carrying a rifle that's almost as big as I am. The goon stops and stares down at all of us, then starts laughing. Oh, just perfect. I know that laugh.

"Great timing, Spike."

The vampire stops dead in his tracks and lowers the big ugly rifle he's carrying. "Oh, bloody priceless. I should take a picture."

"Who is this?" Mira asks, a grimace on her face. She must sense him.

"Hello, what have we here?" Spike asks in return, smiling down at her. Oh, God, this is going to get bad. "You must be that precious

new Slayer I've heard all about."

"He's a friend of ours. A really good friend," I say, hoping the others will play along.

Of course they do. And of course Xander screws it up after a couple minutes.

"Yeah. Real old, real pale kinda friend," he says as Mira is breaking the chains holding him to the wall. He's the last one still tied up.

"What?" Mira drops Xander and he slips, still held up by one shackle. "You're a vampire?" she snarls, dropping into a crouch.

"That's right! I'm the meanest damn vampire in town and it's been too bloody long since I killed a Slayer to prove it." That badge must be getting to his head.

"Not today, worm," Mira snaps back, then frowns and reaches out for the wall to steady herself.

"What? What's - " That's when I feel the tremors. A cloud of dust falls down on us all from above.

"Oops. Looks like it was a load bearing door," Spike says, glancing up at the cave ceiling as tiny rocks start to come tumbling down. "Well, my work here is done. Ta-ta!"

"Dammit! Come back here, you filthy - "

"Mira! Stop."

Damn, she's fast. She's already halfway to the bottom of the stairs before I can get a word in.

"What? He's getting away!"

"Xander! We can't get him loose."

She stares longingly up at the doorway, but only for a second, then races over to help us, dodging falling rocks and not even getting her hair mussed up.

It's a close call, but we manage to carry Xander out - and half-carry Faith, who's not in much better shape - before the cave comes crashing down on our noggins.

Epilogue - Now What? -----

"So...does this sort of thing happen often around here?" Mira asks, staring at what used to be a hill overlooking the ocean. Spike is long gone, naturally.

"About once a week, more or less."

"Hm. Sounds like fun," she says, not-quite-smiling.

"You'll outgrow that pretty fast."

"Hate to interrupt, but I'm really really really drunk. Can someone carry me home?"

Xander. Alcoholic Xander. I don't even want to think about that now.

"We're not too far from my place. You can crash there. You too, Oz, Giles," Faith says before I can get a word in. Not that I had anything coherent in mind. It's the pettiness principle.

"Cool. Got anything to eat? All they gave me on the way out here were stale Whoppers. I prayed for death."

And off we go, almost just like old times. Almost.

End
file.